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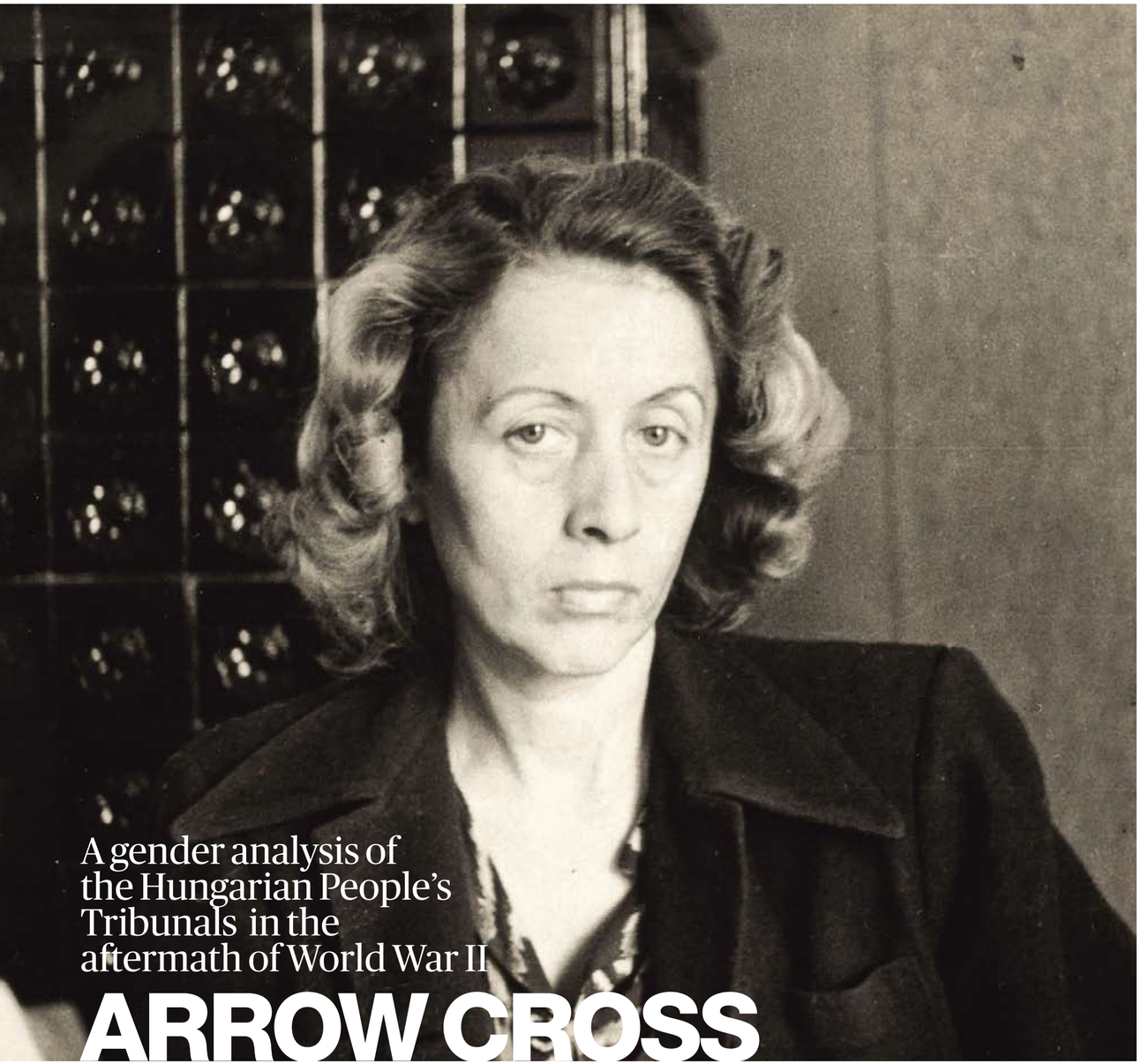

A gender analysis of the Hungarian People's Tribunals in the aftermath of World War II

ARROW CROSS WOMEN AND FEMALE INFORMANTS

BY **ANDREA PETŐ**

Woman as perpetrator can escape even a trained eye. What escaped her eye?

"The Arrow Cross did not bother with women. Women were not partners for them. During the interrogations, I did not meet a single Arrow Cross woman. And you are saying this only now [that 10 percent of Arrow Cross party members were women]. Why didn't you tell me this thirty-five years ago, when I could have swooped down on them?"

This was the answer I received from a former officer of the State Protection Authority, Hungary's secret police (*Államvédelmi Hatóság* or ÁVH), when I asked him, during a 2007 interview, about Arrow Cross women. From 1949 to 1973, this man had investigated domestic reactionary forces (that is, war criminals and Arrow Cross members). The quote illustrates the dilemma that researchers face when they inquire into phenomena the very existence of which many deny. At the Central European University, quantitative researchers have begun work on documents stemming from the Budapest People's Tribunal – documents that have been preserved in the Budapest City Archives. This research represents the first systematic inquiry into the operation of the People's Tribunals. In light of the initial findings, we may reassess the views that experts and the broader public have held on transitional justice and draw attention to previously neglected gender aspects of right-wing radicalism.

THE DEBATE ON THE PEOPLE'S TRIBUNALS

In recent years, the analysis of World War II history has once again taken political center stage in the former Eastern Bloc countries. In Hungary, the debate about criminalizing Holocaust denial was resumed, partly in response to the advance of far-right political organizations whose internal group cohesion is confirmed through Holocaust denial. In Hungary, the debate over who was responsible for the losses in World War II and for the murder of 600,000 Hungarian Jews – or rather the absence of such a debate – has caused a split in the nation's collective memory. After World War II, at the very outset of the democratic transition, the Hungarian People's Tribunals were to draw a distinction among prewar, wartime, and postwar values. The courts that investigated war crimes in Europe, and later in Japan, served the function of defining, in legal terms, such crimes and of punishing offenders. In Hungary, the courts were only half-successful in this endeavor. An inquiry into why this was so may help us re-evaluate various elements of the nation's collective memory.

In Hungary, the post-Holocaust jurisdiction – the 1945 Act on People's Tribunals – was established haphazardly. For this reason, the 1945 Act became controversial. It was criticized on legal as well as political grounds. The 1945 Act on People's Tribunals was a rough sketch; the newly appointed judges, who lacked experience, had to interpret it. Court cases were undertaken quickly, sometimes without thorough preliminary investigation, for it was virtually impossible to carry through such investigations in the immediate aftermath of the war. The primary objective was to prevent people from taking the law into their own hands. Later, as the postwar situation stabilized and the political climate hardened due to the Cold War, new legislation was introduced in order to regulate the function of people's tribunals more strictly. Act VII of 1946 was followed by Act XXXIV of 1947, which regulated the proceedings.[1]

Critics of the work of the People's Tribunals in Hungary have used both legal and political arguments to define the tribunals' shortcomings.[2] The legal critique focuses on these courts' failure to function in a "legal" manner. They were, in fact, political tribunals, for they introduced retrospective justice. The first questions raised about the legal basis of the Tribunals pointed to the fact that international pressure had led to the introduction of retrospective justice. This was not in conformity with the Hungarian legal tradition. Meanwhile, political critiques bring up the fact that the country was under Soviet occupation. They both condemn the courts (as promoters of the Communist takeover) for their excessive rigor, and fault the Communists for being too lenient in their treatment of minor Arrow Cross figures and war criminals who had played a minor "historical role".

It is possible to escape from this discourse by conducting a gender-based analysis that shifts the focus of the investigation. Here, we move from the examination of major representative or emblematic aspects to a focus on less momentous issues, while integrating the gender approach. Until now, historians have generally focused on emblematic "big cases" while ignoring the gender factor – as we see in the statement made by the member of the secret police at the beginning of this article.[3]

THE COURTS

What are the attractions of this new form of analysis? In line with the traditions of women's history, it provides, first and foremost, the opportunity simply to search out women and make them visible within the institutions that produced the documentation which is now available. In other words, historians can do research on the documentation that institutions produced in the course of their work.

Such institutions include the People's Tribunals, in which lawyers, judges, and public prosecutors were active. But this traditional, historical, descriptive approach is apparently far from simple, even as far as the courts are concerned, for the obvious reason that the legal profession was a male profession. Moreover, when it comes to their experience of the country's liberation, Hungary's lawyers were divided right down the middle. Prior to 1914, law was not only a respectable livelihood for the middle classes; it also offered men upward mobility in society. There was only one semester, after the 1918 revolution and while Mihály Károlyi was prime minister, during which female law students could apply for admission to law school. The women who were accepted were allowed to complete their studies, though various special permits were required.[4] It is interesting to follow the careers of the women lawyers who, complying with the gender-based division of the legal profession, dealt with social matters or worked as people's public prosecutors (since they were, as women, considered innocent). The feminization of the law profession after 1945 coincided with the expansion of "Communist law" and a devaluation of the role of law. Women were encouraged to study law because they were seen as reliable. They began to graduate from the university and receive important positions in the newly transformed state apparatus.

ARROW CROSS WOMEN ACTIVISTS

According to membership records, estimated 15,000 women were members of the Arrow Cross Party in Hungary. After the war, these women were interned or imprisoned because they had supported the occupying German forces, or been collaborators. German and Austrian historians are alone in having studied women who were active in right-wing political parties.[5] A pertinent question is: why did these women join a radical and marginal party with an obviously anti-woman program, a party that wished to keep women in the home?"[6]

My research, which is carried out in cooperation with Ildikó Barna (ELTE, Budapest), has shown that, in Budapest, women accounted for 10 percent of those indicted for war crimes.[7] This percentage corresponds roughly to today's female-to-male ratio in Hungarian public life, that is, Hungary's political parties and parliament. In the pre-1945 period, however, women participated only sporadically in public life, so a ratio of 10 percent is relatively high. In the 20th century, women made up a steadily increasing proportion of the total number of war crime offenders – from 3 percent at the turn of the century to 10 percent in 1990. Today, their share is 16 percent. In Hungary, during World War II, a large number of armed and uniformed women made their appearance on the public stage.

As far as its potential field of mobilization was concerned, the Arrow Cross Party resembled the Communist party. It is important to note that the party was formed under the regime of Miklós Horthy, in a political environment that was hostile to women. After World War I, public discourse portrayed women in general, and especially "the new kind of women", as unreliable and dangerous actors who threatened male hegemony in the economic, political and cultural spheres. This was the argument underlying the restriction of women's right to higher education.[8] The improved political position and greater significance of women jeopardized the authority of the pre-1918 political elite. After women had been granted limited voting rights in 1920, the National Association of Hungarian Women (MANSZ), which had been established in 1918 by Cecil Tormay (1875–1937), became an umbrella organization that mobilized middle-class and upper-middle-class women. In doing so, it served to prevent the progress of both left-wing and right-wing radicalism. During the debate on the electoral law in 1938, it became clear that far-right groups – who, like the left-wing groups, fought for expanded voting rights – were gaining strength. It became increasingly difficult to argue that voting rights should be extended to select individuals on the basis of merit and service, especially if one takes into consideration that Hungary was the only European country in which the number of people entitled to vote actually fell during the interwar period. Among the various politicians, Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös (1886–1936), who was enamored with Italy's fascist regime, was the first to engage in women's political mobilization; he

People's courts were created, and arrived at their decisions, in haste. But is it then reasonable to drag out the retroactive anguish?

established a separate political party for women. The Arrow Cross followed his example.

The Arrow Cross Party was composed of many smaller, divided and marginalized groups and parties. Thanks to the personal abilities and ambitions of Ferenc Szálasi, these splinter groups were united in one party in September 1940. The Arrow Cross Party's organization was extremely hierarchical and rigid. The women's section was to be found two organizational levels below the middle, on the same level as the youth section. The women's function was evidently to secure the support of the mass membership; the Arrow Cross leadership seems to have recognized the political usefulness of its women members. Several different kinds of membership were open to women: full membership, supporting membership and even secret membership. The goal was to further women's political engagement. Male Arrow Cross Party leaders joined the leaders of other political parties in seeking to limit the female members' activities to the social field. Press reports indicate, however, that women members were not satisfied with this: they too wished to be active in politics.[9] However, if women members of the Arrow Cross "took themselves seriously", that is, if they behaved as the equals of men, they were immediately expelled from the party headquarters. There was no room for women in the inner circles of the party leadership or in the decision-making process. Even so, official Arrow Cross rhetoric defined "women" as strong and active.

The Arrow Cross movement faced significant opposition; its members were imprisoned and scorned not only by the country's conservative elite, but by the Germans as well, at least up until the final phase of the war. The movement was meant to socialize its members so that they would be prepared for the time when they would have to take action. The hour struck on October 15, 1944, when Hungary's leader, Horthy, failed in his attempts to get the country out of the war and thus paved the way for an Arrow Cross takeover similar to the one accomplished by Quisling in Norway. It is interesting to note, however, that during the brief period that the party held government positions, the women – who had worked untiringly (and sometimes even secretly) for the Arrow Cross Party – were immediately pushed aside.

When analyzing the history of the war, scholars of gender studies have tended to regard women as victims and underdogs. It is evident, however, that Arrow Cross women could be violent, punching people or shooting Jews and throwing them into the Danube. For such women, it was essential to obtain and exercise power. In this way, they avoided the role of the victim, a role that served as a starting point for many in religious, leftwing, and feminist movements.

During the course of the People's Tribunals, which were pursued with great diligence by the Hungarian Communist Party, now part of the governing coalition, it was thought essential to stress the old political regime's culpability. During the trials, female war criminals were almost automatically branded "Arrow Cross members" – even those who had never been party members.[10] Some of these women had merely seized the opportunity to rob and murder while there was a state of war, in the hope of avoiding punishment. The Arrow Cross women were not women in uniform. They did not serve in armed units. Nevertheless, in the discourse of the People's Tribunals, the archetypal "Arrow Cross woman" was portrayed as a bloodthirsty and depraved individual.

It is difficult to estimate how many women were members of the Arrow Cross, not only because there are no available membership files but also because, in Hungary, the "Arrow Cross" label was used freely in public discourse and during trials. Arrow Cross membership cards were rarely found during house searches; the People's Tribunals usually found it sufficient if a witness stated that he or she had seen the accused wearing an Arrow Cross armband. The People's Tribunal would then declare the accused a "member of the Arrow Cross Party", a factor that added to the gravity of his or her crime. Furthermore, during the chaotic, final months of the war, almost anyone had been able to obtain an Arrow Cross armband. Indeed, as the Red Army approached, there had been no need for – or even any possibility of – official party membership or admission procedures. Arrow Cross "membership" was a political label rather than a real category.

MEMORY POLITICS: FORGETTING AND THE FAILURE TO DISCLOSE

One reason why female war criminals have been left out of historical memory is related to the gender-typical characteristics of the post-World War II period and the demise of the "matriarchy born of need". Now, women who violated the patriarchal norm by wearing a uniform or by being active in public space were dealt with in a public and exemplarily strict manner. They were to be pushed back to their "normal" place.[11] After 1945, however, robbers, looters, and murderers as well as the female relatives of party members made their appearance, because they fitted into a public discourse that sought to restore the male-dominated social order that had been upset by the war.

Another reason was that women with criminal records, who came from the lower social classes and who used the Arrow Cross movement either to take vengeance on their adversaries,[13] or to enrich themselves by looting property abandoned by Jews, could not be regarded as "success stories" and so received less publicity.[14] The majority of the women convicted of war crimes were, in fact, merely common criminals. Historians have ignored these women, as they had no "political" significance. As Norman Naimark has argued,[15] ethnic cleansing is always linked to war. In the chaos that ensues, paramilitary units – in this case, the Arrow Cross – become the instruments of political leaders. Ethnic cleansing is also associated with crimes against property, as it provides opportunities for looting.[16]

In accordance with the historical canon, the "more famous" of the female war criminals and Arrow Cross women, such as Gizella Lutz, wife of Arrow Cross party leader Ferenc Szálasi, as well as the famous actress Sári Fedák, feature in the historical accounts alongside the female perpetrators of the mass murder on Maros Street. This supports the fallacious belief that all the female members of Arrow Cross were middle-class and lower-middle-class women who, lacking professional aspirations of their own, passively joined the party under the influence of male relatives, husbands, siblings and fathers. Or that, in addition to these misguided victims of male manipulation, the Arrow Cross movement's female membership was made up of a number of sadistic, insane women, who would later become pathological murderers.

WHAT THE DATA SHOW: THE SILENT MAJORITY

As part of our research, we went through documents relating to women tried by the People's Tribunal in Budapest. Of these women, twenty-one percent were born before 1896, more than half between 1896 and 1914 and the remaining, close to one-fifth, after 1914. The data show that the proportion of middle-class women in this group was significantly higher (20 percent) than in the general population. Most of those accused by the People's Tribunal were middle-aged women who had been educated and socialized under the Horthy regime.

Four-fifths of the women were born in Hungary, while one-fifth were born in areas that Hungary had ceded to other countries in compliance with the Treaty of Trianon (1920). The proportion of women born outside of Hungary was thus significantly higher than in the population as a whole, where the figure was 7 percent. Coming from outside the country's Trianon borders may have had significant bearing on the women's political radicalism. The left-wing's alternative paths to a radical transformation of society, offered by the trade union, social-democratic and Communist movements, were closed to these women, since for them the national question was of central significance. Accordingly, they chose to direct their political activities towards political organizations that offered them social integration and which were responsive to their grievances.

We did not, however, detect a link between the time of the trial and the geographic origin of the accused women: there is no correlation between the year when the women were indicted and their having originated from inside or outside of Hungary.

An analysis of the data according to the type of settlement from which the accused women originated reveals that women from small towns are over-represented. Ten percent of the women belonged to this category – which is more than one would expect based on the ratio for the general population. Women from cities (*nagyvárosok*) were under-represented by 7 percent and those from small towns (*nagyközségek*) were under-represented by 5 percent.

Because different categories were used, it is not easy to compare the data from the People's Tribunals to that provided by the census. However, a large proportion of the women found in the database belonged to intellectual professions. In 1941, only 6 of percent Hungary's female wage earners worked as public servants or in intellectual professions; the corresponding ratio among the women indicted was at least one in five.[17] This is an important piece of data, because women with good contacts – most of whom were intellectuals – often avoided prosecution. Moreover, the list of women convicted by the People's Tribunals does not include Arrow Cross women who published articles in the Arrow Cross newspapers from the 1930s and onwards. These women fled to the West. Because they were not "important", no attempt was made to have them extradited, and so they were left out of history. (They returned to Hungary only after 1989, and then as anti-Communist fighters.) The same goes for the women's branch of the National Association of Hungarian Physicians (MONE), which played a key role in the intellectual embedding of the far-right movement. It would require a separate study to account for the rightist radicalization of women, particularly the shift by the first generation of women physicians' from espousing equality before the law to endorsing state-run eugenics. From our point of view, however, it is significant that three female physicians – Dr. Erzsébet Madarász, as well as two other members of the National Association of Physicians – came under the scrutiny of the People's Tribunals. By 1971, Erzsébet Madarász, who had headed the women's branch of the National Association of Physicians, was practicing again in Budapest, as a senior physician. Apart from Madarász, no other Arrow Cross female district leaders feature on this list.

When we analyzed data for women indicted for war crimes according to their occupational status, we were surprised to discover that a great proportion of these women were classified as housewives, widows, or aunts (46 percent). This is surprising because there had been no previous institutional mobilization of that social stratum.

As far as occupation is concerned, we found two other relatively striking features. In 1945, 8 percent of the indicted women were concierges or assistant concierges – whereas in the general sample the number was only 5 percent. These women were common criminals who came from a lower middle class or working class background. Their activities had been motivated by a wish to get their hands on Jewish property. The post-war authorities could easily and quickly get their hands on the concierges. Those of the concierges who did not flee were the first to be denounced by the ordinary residents. This meant that they were drawn into the machinery of justice at an early date. In 1950, finally, agricultural laborers were strongly over-represented: 14 percent of those indicted came from this group, while the share of agricultural laborers in the general population was 6 percent. Thus, contrary to popular belief, not only were members of the organization of ethnic Germans living in Hungary, the *Volksbund*, put on trial (most of whom had been expelled from the country) but large numbers of Hungarian peasant farmers as well.

THE "BIG FISH"

The database on "important" female perpetrators held by the State Security Historical Archive, which is the secret service's archival database, is not compatible with the database in the Budapest City Archives. Both databases have logical gaps and logical deficiencies as far as their comparability is concerned. This renders them inaccurate. Even so, the database of the State Security Historical Archive, which is based on documents from the People's Tribunals, does reveal which people the national security organs focused on. It also tells us something about the functions that the women "selected" for surveillance fulfilled in the Arrow Cross movement, as well as why they were convicted and which sentences they received.

The typical war crime committed by women was denunciation (*besúgás* and *feljelentés*). If we include the denunciation of Hungarian soldiers, then the category of "denunciation" accounts for more than 50 percent of the crimes committed by the women.

The data show that more than half of the convicted women received a limited punishment of police supervision or internment. The data also reveal the state security organs' inaccurate record-keeping. According to the records, only one woman was sentenced to death, and yet we know that at least seven women received a death sentence. The exact number of Hungarian women sentenced to death is unknown, but it was far higher than in the Netherlands and Belgium, where the number was one and two, respectively.[18]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR A GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS

The testimonies of women on trial by the People's Tribunals allow us to map out various reasons why Hungarian women joined the extreme right-wing party. We have no other testimonies, so we must be keenly aware of the limitations of these testimonies. When women join political parties, they have a variety of aspirations, ideas, and plans. The party leaders defined women as an element that would advance their own plans for social changes. These women defined their own spheres of action differently, and they also had alternative assessments of their potential spheres of action.

A methodical analysis of the confessions and testimonies made at the People's Tribunals is difficult because the accused adjusted their statements to conform to expectations and to gain strategic advantages. No normal person incriminates him- or herself willingly. Conversely, many are prepared to confess to their crimes when tried in a court of law. When defendants testify in court, they must select the cultural repertoire that will assist them in presenting whatever they have to say to their best advantage. In what follows, we shall analyze the various factors that influence the selection of this cultural repertoire. This will help clarify the process by which the accused formulate statements about themselves and seek to justify their own decisions and actions by referring to special circumstances – thus constructing an image of themselves in a process that is not without risks.

In the postwar period, which gave rise to extreme power relations, the stories of those who had survived the Shoah were heard by nobody.[19] A dismissive audience silenced the narration. There was no rhetorical space for a narrative of Jewish identity, as the dominant Communist ideology was hostile to the Jewish community as a religious group, for ideological reasons, and to Zionism, for political reasons, as it threatened the assimilation project.[20]

This phenomenon makes itself felt in language – because language provides the tools with which a narrator tells his or her story.[21] The authoritarian states were based on control; they totally dominated the linguistic space that was available for the expression of thoughts. Meanwhile, the various groups created special meanings in order to establish an identity by invoking epistemological space. If we speak of a mediated past rather than an immediate past, we come close to resolving the dilemma of how to view these sources. The sphere of such mediation was the family. The family made up a space that was closed to state intervention and direct regulatory power. Identity was established within the family, with a dividing line drawn between "us" and "them" – between those Hungarians who supported the Soviets and those who opposed them. The Hungarians who defined themselves as "non-Communists" – and non-Communism was the cornerstone of the self-definition of anyone involved in crime or criminal activities committed during the years of Soviet occupation – were those Hungarians who saw themselves as victims of Communism. They developed a language of the victim, a counter-discourse, which would allow them to tell their stories in a political discourse dominated by Communism. After 1945, the language of "Communist crimes" became the language of the minority discourse – which was developed against the majority's suppression, and which became a departure point for establishing a self-identity.[22] Thus, those female defendants whose "cultural repertoire", to use Michele Lamont's expression, accorded with the anticipated mode of remembering, received relatively light sentences. They were handled more leniently than were men who committed the same offense. Here, gender strategies worked to the advantage of women: women received light sentences as compared to males who had committed the very same crime. The "master frame" of becoming a victim created an opportunity for improvisation. The definition of autobiographical remembering as "an improvisational activity that forms emergent selves which give us a sense of needed comfort and a culturally valued sense of personal coherence over time" is called into question by the traumatic events of the 20th century and particularly by the Shoah, which, as Craig Barclay has shown, removed any possibility of "metaphoric mapping". [23]

Remembering occurs in a mythical way, establishing a more or less similar self-representation which is similar to the others. If, as Roland Barthes claims, a

The Arrow Cross woman was no Amazon. Nor was she a victim.

text is a security system for the ego, then creating a life story provides the narrator with illusory or imaginary control not only over the narrative but also over life itself.[24] This is the control that the women who stood accused at the People's Tribunals believed that they possessed. The defendants thus tried to construct a coherent self-representation, mindful of the fact that a single error would lead to their imprisonment for years. In the courtroom, the ability to give a perfect theater performance became a matter of life or death.

THE HISTORY OF NON-ACKNOWLEDGED ACTORS IN SOCIETY

A gender-sensitive analysis of political and social discourse is made particularly difficult by the fact that the identity-shaping power of the discourses establishes homogenous and exclusive units. In times of war, women are portrayed as loyal mothers and citizens who send their sons to war – or as the reverse, collaborators who are a threat to the soldiers' morals. The question is: where do we find subjectivity in these personal narratives? As far as sources related to criminal cases are concerned, we face particular difficulties, for if we regard them as "legends" – to use Paul Thompson's expression – then they are of a fixed structure and conform to the socially accepted system. The court creates a lineal, single-threaded, exclusive narrative regime, and the accused has to find his or her place within this regime. In this situation, female defendants were faced with dual discrimination.

Feminist researchers are sensitive to the development of various power hierarchies and appreciate the consequences of such hierarchies.[25] Concerning the court trial records, power relations among the various actors differ significantly – not merely as a result of the hierarchy and politics of the legal system itself, but also because of differences between defendants and plaintiffs in terms of social status and gender and the degree of their embeddedness in various social networks. The more embedded a defendant was (with corresponding access to information and assistance), the easier she found it to manipulate the court, and thus, often, secure an acquittal.

The story is shaped by the defendant's confession or testimony and is based on her responses to questions. At the People's Tribunals, the questions were posed by men, for women were not employed as lawyers, judges or public prosecutors. All the court officials were men; not until 1945 were women allowed to pursue a legal career. The court's gender policy is obvious, judging from the data. Women defendants who portrayed themselves as weak and powerless victims who had submissively complied with the suggestions and initiatives of men received lighter sentences. The stories of the female accused are "silent", because these women managed, while in the courtroom, to exploit "legends", thus avoiding a search for individual expressions, meanings, and thoughts. The end result was that they were not required to express themselves as individuals. The diversity of the legends, and the many different ways in which they could be used, provided many of the women with a means to obtain lighter sentencing. On the other hand, stories of an individual nature did not accord with the court's cognitive sample. Accordingly, politically active women received harsher sentences. A gender-based analysis may, thus, contribute to a better understanding of the complex legacy of the People's Tribunals and the effect of this legacy on contemporary Hungarian society. It may help us understand why a former officer and interrogator of the State Protection Authority cannot recall a single Arrow Cross woman. ≈

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